

(Un)Covering the Silence During the Argentinean Coup d'État

AYERAY MEDINA BUSTOS, DAVID WEBB, AND GAVIN J. FAIRBAIRN

This essay examines the connection between the media, society, and human rights movements in Argentina during the last savage dictatorship that ruled that country between 1976 and 1983. During the so-called Dirty War (a term coined by the Argentinean military as an excuse to eliminate groups of a different political ideology), an estimated 30,000 people were killed, “disappeared,” kidnapped, and tortured. According to the CONADEP 2007 archives, there were denouncements of approximately 600 kidnappings before the *coup d'état* on March 24, 1976, and thousands of people were illegally deprived of their freedom. 8,960 are still missing.

In 1975, Argentina was destroyed by economic conflict. Inflation increased to approximately 335 percent, and the level of exports was catastrophic. Guerrillas continued to attack the police and military, and there were active terrorist groups from the left and from the right. The economic and political crises resulted in the inability of Isabel Peron (who had taken on the presidency after her husband's death in 1974) to govern. The military felt forced to intervene, however, and instead of peace and order, they brought terror, political and economic instability, and led the country almost to its destruction, according to D.C. Hodges.

A deliberately planned state terror and censorship regime was inflicted on a target population by the Argentine military. We will investigate the attitudes of the Argentinean society and the media during that time of terror for the Argentinean people. The military regime imposed a “politics of silence,” and this was generally supported by the press and media. The attitude of most newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV stations was, at best, indifference, and at worst, collaboration with the military. The few who did publish protest were jailed, tortured, or forced into exile. Jacobo Timerman, for example, creator of the daily newspaper *La Opinion*, published a supplement in

which he highlighted the incrementation of human rights violations made by the military, until he was arrested in 1977. From then on, he was subjected to electric shock torture, beatings, and solitary confinement until his release in 1979 when he fled the country, reported M. Osiel, J. Knudson, and P. Buchanan. These experiences were described in his book, *Preso sin nombre, celda sin número*, where he gives an insight into the mind of one of his torturers, Captain Beto, by quoting him as saying: “only God gives and takes life. But God is busy elsewhere, and we’re the ones who must undertake this task in Argentina.” It is also important to highlight the close ties that the media had with the Catholic Church, an institution that also supported the military regime between 1976 and 1983.

The press, radio, and TV were warned about the “inconvenience of disseminating the news,” and so they only did so by broadcasting the well-known military “communiqués.” Economic interests and fear of the military, or sympathy for it, kept the mass media generally at the service of the regime. The English newspaper *Buenos Aires Herald*, managed by Roberto Cox, who was imprisoned and then went into exile, was one of the few that spoke out against the regime, however. Others included: *Nueva Presencia*, managed by Herman Schiller, *The Southern Cross*, directed by Federico Richards, and in the last years of the regime, the magazine *Humor*, and the previously mentioned *La Opinion*. Among the publications that supported the military regime and defended their crimes were: *Editorial Atlantida* (*Somos*, *Gente*, and *Para Ti* magazines), the magazine *Cabildo*, and the newspapers *La Nueva Provincia* from Bahia Blanca and *La Prensa* from Buenos Aires. The TV channels, radio stations, and majority belonged to the state, and so were totally at the regime’s service, according to E. Mignone.

The harassment of journalists, the use of terror to silence writers, musicians, teachers, lawyers, psychologists, and so on, and the well-known black-listing of dissenters, were all experienced in Argentina during the period of the military regime, just as they were in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Approximately four hundred journalists, along with many other people, fled the country, and at least eighty-four were killed during that time. In fact, despite the fact that democracy was re-established in 1983, there are still remnants of the past authoritarianism, affecting the press in particular. The threats did not stop with the dictatorship; journalists were also threatened by Alfredo Astiz, known as the “blond angel of death,” who retired from the Argentine Navy in 1996 and is quoted in a newspaper interview in 1998, according to C. Sims, as saying:

... all journalists writing about the 'dirty war' should be careful not to suffer the same fate as the photographer Jose Luis Cabezas, who was murdered last year while investigating police corruption in Buenos Aires Province. 'Do you know what?' he asked. 'I am technically the best-trained man in the country to kill a politician or a journalist.'

The general public did not know how to react to the silence, disinformation, confusion, and terror to which they were subjected. They did not know where to go to denounce their subjugators or who to ask regarding their disappeared relatives, friends, and neighbors. Those who were not directly affected by the regime adopted an attitude of indifference mainly out of fear. There were no answers about the fate of the disappeared, and the authorities at that time denied having any information about them. The attitude of "*Por algo sera*" (there must be a reason for their disappearances) or "*No te metas*" (don't get involved) characterized the Argentinean society during that period.

The dissenters or "subversives," as they were called by national security, started to figure among the numbers of the "disappeared." All of the subversives became possible targets: members of student's centers; journalists not disposed to the regime; psychologists and sociologists who belonged to suspected professional groups; priests and nuns who mostly worked in poor villages; construction workers; university teachers; scientists; and their friends and relatives. From the moment these people were arrested, they lost all their rights and all communication with the outside world. With no idea of what their fate had in store, they were tortured, mutilated, humiliated, and even murdered. The kidnappings were mostly carried out very early in the morning, close to weekends, from private addresses, the streets, work places, universities, and so on. A "*patota*" (usually a group of five or six people, but sometimes numbering fifty or sixty) burst in to the victims' homes or work places. They carried with them an arsenal of weapons because of the "dangerous" nature of their victims. In some cases, CONADEP reported, they also cut off the electricity in the whole area of the operation.

Even under such massive abuses, human rights movements appeared and occupied a significant position in the public domain. They grew, organized, and promoted international solidarity, supported victims and their relatives, and played an essential role in the defense of human rights. In late 1975, the APDH (Permanent Assembly for Human Rights) was created, bringing together a group of politicians and intellectuals who were prepared to defend human rights and denounce violations. They were later joined by relatives and victims. The SERPAJ (Service of Peace and Justice) emerged around the same

time. Among its goals was the defense of indigenous peoples and the rights of minorities. CELS (the Centre for Legal and Social Studies) was created in 1980. It is an organization that offers professional legal assistance to victims and their relatives. Some other organizations also started to emerge at this time, including: *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of Plaza de Mayo); *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo), and *Familiares de Desaparecidos y Presos por Razones Políticas* (Relatives of the Disappeared and Political Prisoners).

By the end of 1977, the Mothers had gathered a list of 800 “disappearances.” The number of documented cases rose to 2,500 by May 1978 and to some 4,000 in September 1979. Twelve mothers, their relatives, and two French nuns in supporting roles were kidnapped and tortured in the ESMA (Navy Engineering School). They have still to reappear.

The Mothers’ and Grandmothers’ role in seeking justice in Argentina is essential. Those brave women fought against the military regime to try and achieve a just society. They showed the rest of the world what was happening in their country and campaigned tirelessly for the reappearance of their children. Their task was not easy. They risked their lives doing all of that, but they were not scared, and they continue to work for justice and the defense of human rights to this day.

Argentine society is still immersed in deep suffering and pain, as details of the disappearances are still not forthcoming, and the truth has still not been completely uncovered. If what happened during the *Proceso* is not discussed, however, and the various associated issues are not resolved, then it is probable that those atrocities might be repeated. This is why it is so important to communicate the facts to the public, to remember, to promote social participation, and to heal the damaged society in Argentina.

In conclusion, it is worth reflecting on the words of R. Kaës:

Trauma experiences in social catastrophes destroys trust and, even worse, transforms its victims into strangers, aliens to a story that they cannot take as belonging to them. Only external memory, collective memorials, history that is constantly searching for meaning, can protect against the resurgence of the horror of repetition and the silence of death, and offer some backing to tell with borrowed words some of its truth. (Our translation)

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Ayeray Medina Bustos is currently a Ph.D student in Peace and Development at Leeds Metropolitan University. She is also a clinical Psychologist and holds three Masters’ degrees. She is an active member of the Conflict Research Society. E-mail: A.Medina-Bustos@leedsmet.ac.uk

David Webb is a Professor of Engineering and Director of the Praxis Centre for Research in Information and Technology for Peace, Conflict Resolution, and Human Rights at Leeds Metropolitan University. E-mail: d.webb@leedsmet.ac.uk

Gavin J. Fairbairn is a professor of Ethics and Language at Leeds Metropolitan University. E-mail: g.fairbairn@leedsmet.ac.uk

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